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**Herc is the difference between the Protestant
and the Catholic teaching on the question of
being certain of one's salvation.**



IS ANYBODY SURE OF GOING TO HEAVEN?

R. J. MILLER, C.S.S.R.

“Have you been saved?”

This question is an important one in the lives of many Protestants. For certain denominations hold that “being saved” is something that happens to a person; it is an experience as real as having pneumonia or graduating from school. Only it is a *religious* experience, and its effect is that the person is sure of heaven. When it has happened, there is a complete end to sinning in a person’s life, and a complete turning to God. Thus his final perseverance in God’s favor is no longer doubtful. He belongs to the elect. He “has been” saved in the sense that it is absolutely certain that he “will be” saved when he dies.

What does the Catholic Church teach on this matter?

She recognizes very readily that God does favor many persons, Catholic and non-Catholic, with a "religious experience" of lasting benefit in their lives. She points to some such experience in the lives of her own Saints.

But she does not hold that such an experience, once had, is an absolute guarantee of final perseverance in God's grace; the experience of "being saved," in other words, is not an infallible sign that a person "will be" saved when he dies.

It is not quite that easy. There is many a text in the Holy Bible indicating that the task of getting to heaven is supposed to be hard work all the way. We know that our good Protestant friends can present various Bible texts to support their view; and we assure them that we can do the same for the Catholic view. But our object in this article is not to bandy Bible texts, it is

rather to explain the Catholic teaching, which is the teaching of the Bible and of Christ, on this matter of "Have you been saved?"

The Church has summarized that teaching in two of the decrees of one of her general Councils, the Council of Trent. And St. Alphonsus Liguori, one of the Doctors of the Catholic Church, applies the teaching to practical cases.

In Session 6 of the Council of Trent, Decrees 15 and 16 were as follows:

If anyone should say that a man who has been born anew and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is certainly among the number of the predestined, *let him be anathema*. (This is the technical term to describe heretical doctrine).

If anyone should say that he is certain, with absolute and infallible certainty (unless he has learned it from a special revelation), that he is going to receive the great gift of final perseverance, *let him be anathema*.

And this is what St. Alphonsus Liguori has to say in his book, *The Way of Salvation*, page 260:

If we would be assured of not losing God, let us give ourselves indeed wholly to God. He that does not give himself wholly to God is ever in danger of turning his back upon Him and losing Him; but a soul which resolutely separates itself from everything, and gives itself all to God, will no more lose Him; because God Himself will not allow that a soul that has heartily given itself all to Him should turn its back upon Him and perish. Wherefore a great servant of God was wont to say that when we read of the fall of any who had before given tokens of living a holy life, we must consider that such persons had not given themselves all to God.

The quotation from St. Alphonsus is wonderfully consoling; but the reader may have found that it leaves him with a feeling of doubt as far as the present question is concerned. Indeed, he may have not one but two doubts. The first is: Does not St. Alphonsus seem to be contradicting the Council of Trent? And the second: Does he not seem to be agreeing with the Protestant position in this thing of "Have you been saved?"

There is no doubt, it should be stressed, that the paragraph just quoted from

St. Alphonsus actually represents his mature judgment on the question. It is not a matter of an opinion which he held in his early years, and which later study required him to correct. No; the book in which our quotation appears was published in the year 1773, when St. Alphonsus was 77 years old; and incidentally, *after* he had published a book of commentary on the Decrees of the Council of Trent.

What then about the seeming discrepancy between a Doctor of the Church and a Council of the Church?

“Seeming” discrepancy is all that it is. The Council and St. Alphonsus are not talking about the same kind of certainty. The Council is speaking of “absolute and infallible certainty,” St. Alphonsus, of “moral” certainty. They are definitely not the same thing. Infallible certainty admits of no mistake whatever. Moral certainty takes into account the possibility of human mistakes and failings. I have infallible certainty, for instance, of my own existence. I can

have moral certainty of the state of my health, and of its continuance, if I take proper care of it.

Applying this to the matter of “Have you been saved?”, then, I have infallible certainty that God on His part will grant heaven to those who persevere in His grace until death. For myself, with my possibility of mistakes and failings, I cannot have infallible certainty of my own perseverance. But at the same time I can have moral certainty that I shall persevere, if I take the proper care to make myself worthy of the promises of Christ. And while I am taking proper care, I have in that very fact a *sign* of my perseverance or predestination.

Such is the doctrine of the Catholic Church, as presented by the Council of Trent and St. Alphonsus Liguori, on “Have you been saved?” They do not contradict each other; rather, St. Alphonsus fills in and rounds out the teaching of the Council. In another pas-

sage of *The Way of Salvation*, for instance, he says: (page 202):

It is true that, without a divine revelation, no man can possess an infallible certainty of his own salvation; but he that has given himself with a true heart to God, and is ready to lose everything, even life itself, rather than lose divine grace, has a moral certainty that he will be saved.

This certainty is founded on the divine promises; no man, says the Scripture, ever trusted in God and was confounded.

This distinction between infallible certainty and moral certainty is not peculiar to St. Alphonsus. It is the teaching of Catholic theologians generally. Fr. Garrigou-LaGrange, for instance, a renowned theologian of our own day, declares in his book *Life Everlasting*, page 261, that while the Council of Trent teaches that we cannot be "infallibly" certain of heaven, still there are signs which give us a kind of "moral" certainty.

And here are the *signs* which Garrigou-LaGrange lists:

1) A good life; 2) the testimony of a good conscience; 3) patience in adversities; 4) relish for the light and the word of God; 5) mercy to those who suffer; 6) love of enemies; 7) humility; 8) special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Father Garrigou-LaGrange goes on to add a "sign" of particular importance; namely, fulfilling the devotion of receiving Holy Communion on the "nine First Fridays." This devotion had its origin in the revelations of Our Divine Lord to St. Margaret Mary regarding His Sacred Heart; and among the promises He made in this connection was the following:

I promise thee in the excessive mercy of My Heart that my all-powerful love will grant to all those who communicate on the First Friday in nine consecutive months the grace of final repentance; they shall not die in My disgrace nor without receiving their sacraments; My divine Heart shall be their safe refuge in this last moment.

Father Garrigou-LaGrange considers this sign to be of special importance

because it is based on a promise of Christ that is unconditional; he quotes with approval (page 53, note) the statement of another author that "this promise is *absolute* for Communions well made."

The "sign" which St. Alphonsus gives as a basis for moral certainty about our salvation is that we "give ourselves with a true heart to God." What this means in particular we shall see in a moment; but first let us take up the matter of the seeming agreement between St. Alphonsus and the Protestants on the question of "Have you been saved?"

The agreement between St. Alphonsus and the Protestants on this point is only seeming, just as the disagreement between St. Alphonsus and the Council of Trent was only seeming.

Instead of agreement between St. Alphonsus and the Protestants, there is fundamental difference. It is the differ-

ence between "salvation by faith alone", as Luther taught, and "If you would enter into life, *keep the commandments*," as Jesus Christ taught. The difference is between faith without works, and faith plus hope and good works. The difference is between having something happen to you (a "religious experience" bringing faith and predestination) and actually going to work with God's help to win salvation. It is the difference between being passive and being active about your eternal salvation.

Many a good Protestant, however, is not so completely passive about working out his salvation as the doctrine of "salvation by faith alone" would strictly require. Many a Protestant is more a Catholic than a Protestant in the way he "keeps the commandments," even though he may be using Protestant terms like "Have you been saved?" In sober truth he may be one who, according to his lights, has "given himself to

God with a true heart," just as St. Alphonsus lays it down.

With such persons St. Alphonsus is not in disagreement, as far as the conduct of their lives is concerned. They have given themselves wholly to God, and they continue to do so. Even if they were to see, as some of them by God's grace do, that giving themselves to God meant joining the Catholic Church, that is exactly what they would do, and many of them do.

To such generous souls the words of St. Alphonsus above quoted have a very special application:

A soul which resolutely separates itself from everything and gives itself all to God, *will no more lose Him;*

because *God Himself will not allow* that a soul that has heartily given itself all to Him should turn its back upon Him and perish.

And there are other statements by the Saint in the *Way of Salvation* carrying the same power and inspiration:

In what peril does the soul stand of losing God and perishing when it has not attained to the giving itself wholly to God; while he who has truly given himself altogether to God *can rest secure of never leaving Him*, because the Lord is truly merciful and faithful to everyone who gives himself to Him without reserve.

But why is it that some persons, who began by living a holy life, afterwards fall so grievously, that they leave us little hope of their salvation? Why, indeed, is this? I answer, that they had not given themselves wholly to God; and this their fall is the proof of it.

Whoever places his whole confidence in God is sure of eternal salvation.

But what does St. Alphonsus mean by giving oneself all to God, or by placing one's whole confidence in God?

The Saint, being a very practical man, is most careful to give us practical directions in this regard. In the *Way of Salvation*, page 234, he says:

If we desire to be saved, and to acquire a perfect union with God, let us take care to be ever offering up the prayer of David: "Teach me, O Lord, to do Thy will!"

And for this purpose let us strip ourselves of our own will, and give it wholly to God, without reserve.

The sacrifice of our own will is the most acceptable sacrifice we can make to God; and God *pours forth his graces abundantly* upon him who makes it.

This sacrifice, however, in order to be perfect, must have two conditions: it must be *without reserve*, and it must be *constant*.

Some persons give to God their will, but with a certain reserve; and little does this gift please God.

Others give Him their will, but speedily they take it back again; and such persons place themselves in great peril of being abandoned by God.

He even gets down to careful particulars, on page 186:

1. Not to commit even the slightest venial sin.
2. To neglect nothing which may be pleasing to God, always with the approbation of his director.
3. Out of all good things, to choose that which is most pleasing to God.

4. Not to wait for tomorrow, but whatever can be done today, to do it.
5. To pray daily to God that he may increase in His love. With love everything can be done; without love, nothing. To gain everything, we must give everything. Jesus has given Himself wholly to us, that we may be wholly His.

It presents a strenuous program, but one by no means impossible to a truly generous soul. And above all, how consoling and inspiring it is to have the word of a great Saint and Doctor of the Church that we have it in our power, with God's help, to make morally sure of our salvation by thus giving ourselves generously and wholly to God.

The soul that resolutely separates itself from everything and gives itself all to God *will no more lose Him*;

because *God Himself will not allow* that a soul that has heartily given itself all to Him should turn its back upon Him and perish.

St. Alphonsus is often mistakenly thought to be “too strict;” this doctrine of his reveals him for what he really is: the Doctor of Confidence in God.



Can Non-Catholics Be Saved?

Objection: It is well known that Catholics believe that nobody can be saved who does not become a Catholic. This teaching in itself is enough to convince anybody that the Catholic religion cannot be true. There are thousands of good, honest, conscientious people outside the Catholic Church. It is unthinkable that they should all be lost.

Answer: It is a saddening proof of how widely the Catholic Church has been misrepresented that anybody should still believe that she teaches that non-Catholics cannot possibly be saved. The Catholic Church holds no such doctrine. What she does hold is so completely logical and Scriptural that nobody who understands it can take scandal or offense at it.

The Catholic Church teaches that everybody will be judged by God on the basis of his fidelity to conscience throughout life. Anyone who is convinced in conscience that God wants him to do one thing, and who deliber-

ately acts contrary to what his conscience tells him is God's will or command, is doing wrong, and unless he repents sincerely of his disobedience to the dictates of conscience, he will be punished for it in the end. Anyone who sincerely believes he must be a Lutheran or a Methodist or a Baptist in order to be saved, is bound to practice such a religion so long as he is convinced that it is God's command. Only thus can he ever save his immortal soul.

At the same time all intelligent persons believe that, objectively there can be only one true religion, and that once a man is convinced that he has found the one true religion, he must also be convinced that God wants all men to practice that religion. So he will become interested in making it known to others; in answering objections against it; in praying for its spread over the face of the whole earth. He does not think for a moment that God condemns everybody who has never heard of it, or who

has been brought up on misrepresentations and misstatements about it. He knows that they will be judged according to their knowledge and their fidelity to conscience. But he does want to help others to know the true religion.

This then, is the position of Catholics: they are convinced that there can be but one true religion. If anyone knows what the true religion is and does not embrace and follow it, he cannot be saved. Anyone who does not know it, or who has been taught untruths about it, can be saved by being obedient to what his conscience tells him is the will of God.



On Predestination

Many people have difficulty in reconciling God's foreknowledge of what will happen to them with the concept of free will. They are tempted to believe that it does not matter what they do or do not, because their fate is settled beforehand by a supreme decree of God. The question is: Can their responsibility for their own eternal destiny be proved?

1. It can be proved, first by the fact that God, for all His foreknowledge and supreme power, has clearly and unmistakably announced to all human beings that they have a choice to make, according to which they will be saved or lost. "If thou wouldst enter into life," He said, "keep my commandments." "You are my friends if you do the things I have commanded you." "God wills not the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live." These and many other statements and commands could only be made on the assumption

that man is free to obey or disobey, to save or lose his own soul.

2. It is proved also by the fact that Christ suffered so long and so bitterly in order to win the compassion, love and loyalty of all His creatures. Had it been His plan to determine beforehand and directly to cause certain people to be saved and certain ones to be lost, there would be no point in the excessive suffering He endured. It would have been easy to redeem those who would never be able to stray from the path of salvation anyway. The fact that He suffered so much proves His desire to win the love of everybody, which means that He wanted everybody to love Him freely and thereby to save their souls.

3. It is proved finally by the fact that He made prayer, the sacraments and the other means of grace so easy, so universal, so accessible to all. It is true that God's help is necessary for anyone who wants to save his soul, but nobody can say that such help is entirely beyond his

reach. Thus He made prayer an infallible means of grace; constituted the sacraments out of the simplest and most ordinary things; and He commanded His Church to carry the message of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. All this assumes again that individuals are to work out their salvation, not to think that it has been worked out beforehand by God.

All the doubts that arise from God's universal power, foreknowledge and influence in the world must be swept aside by the clear expressions of His will for men. There are many things about God that are mysterious and difficult to understand; there is no difficulty or mystery about the fact that He has put salvation squarely up to the individual, aided by the graces that He holds in readiness for all.



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